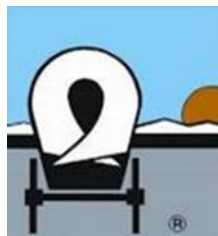


# Tour: The Humboldt River is North - So Let's go South



*“Through the lens of history, preserving the past, focusing on the future.”*

Oregon-California Trails Association  
38<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention  
Elko, Nevada – September 13-16, 2021



## The Humboldt River is north ... so let's go south

This tour speculates how two possible route changes of the Hastings Cutoff to the Humboldt River might have 'changed the course of history'. We will make a loop drive to include these two routes with several stops, mostly at Trails West, Inc. markers. One route may not have been known to Lansford Hastings and the other was apparently rejected. Either would have saved perhaps two weeks of difficult travel. This is a one day, 150 mile tour limited to 12 cars and will provide some pleasant scenery.

A lead-in to consider while on this tour:

### The "John Work" route [see attached map]

"The Snake Country Expedition of 1830-31" led by John Work, of Britain's Hudson Bay Company, entered a portion of northeast Nevada (without wagons) that would later include part of the 1846 Hastings Cutoff. A common point was reached by both Work's party and those later taking the Hastings Cutoff, at Snow Water Lake south of Wells, NV. Both groups were headed for the Humboldt River which was then and still is, with Interstate 80, the 'highway across Nevada'.

From Snow Water Lake, Work went north, approximately by what is now Highway 93, to reach the Humboldt River. This is a short, direct, and level wagon route that will be evident on this tour. Many of the British participants on this Work expedition subsequently settled in Willamette Valley, Oregon<sup>1</sup>, presumably as did some American trappers and traders, and later American immigrants. There should have been ample opportunity between 1831 and 1846 for exchange of information between the British and Americans in Willamette Valley, or with two others on Work's expedition - Baptiste Gardipie (with variant spellings) and Francois

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<sup>1</sup> Participants of Work's expedition with brief bios are in an addendum list to The Snake Country River Expedition of 1830-31, John Work's Field Journal, edited by Francis D. Haines, Jr., University of Oklahoma Press, 1971

Payette<sup>2</sup>, both having many apparent American contacts outside of Willamette Valley to (at least) 1846.

A limited attempt was made, with scant success, to determine if Work's route was known to persons familiar with early travels into California – like John Fremont, or mountain men and guides James Clyman and James Hudspeth. Both Clyman and Hudspeth accompanied Hastings on his eastbound trip that led to creation of 'his' cutoff. Clyman was at least aware of Peter Skene Ogden's Hudson Bay Company earlier expeditions along the Humboldt River. When they were heading east along the Humboldt River, Clyman noted in his journal: "Mr. Ogden visited this region some 25 years ..." ago.

Clyman likely learned of Ogden's travels when he was at Fort Vancouver in late October of 1844 and met with 'Dr.' John McLaughlin of the Hudson Bay Company. Clyman mentions receiving "... all the information desired on all subjects connected with the country ..." <sup>3</sup> from McLaughlin. This would have been a good opportunity to learn of Work's route to reach the Humboldt; however, no mention of Work was found in Clyman's journal.

Instead of heading north to get to the Humboldt River, emigrants taking the Hastings Cutoff with wagons went far south and without problem crossed over the now named Overland Pass (aka Hastings Pass). They then traveled far north through the difficult deep canyon of the South Fork of the Humboldt to reach its confluence with the Humboldt River where the 'cutoff' re-joined the prior established California trail. [Added to other blunders, taking the Hastings Cutoff became a fateful decision for the Donner Party which failed to get over the Sierra before winter.]

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<sup>2</sup> "In 1837 Payette became the post master of Fort Boise and retained that position until his retirement in 1844", a quote from footnote 1 above. Fremont was likely familiar with Fort Boise as an 1848 map created under his direction included this fort.

<sup>3</sup> Journal of a Mountain Man, James Clyman, Published by Mountain Press, 1984

### The Secret Pass route [see attached map]

Hastings decided, with some objections, to depart from the main California Trail near Halleck, Nevada, and head east by way of Secret Pass – without wagons - to create his alternative, and presumed, shorter route to California. Prior parties had used this same Secret Pass, but none with wagons, including:

Peter Skene Ogden in 1824 & 1829

[Work avoids it in 1831]

Edward Meyer Kern (under Fremont command) in 1845

For unknown reasons Hastings (and others) apparently did not consider Secret Pass to be a viable route for wagons. But, just four years later, in 1850, James Denver de-bunked this by taking wagons westward over the pass with scarcely any comment about difficulty<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that between 1846 and 1850 a detailed map published under John Fremont's direction may have been known to Denver. A partial map copy is attached which shows the entire mountain range that confronted travelers to the west of Snow Water Lake. While Secret Pass was not perhaps as practical as Work's route, it certainly appears to be a very direct approach to the Humboldt and certainly superior to Hastings choice – which Denver proved.

### NOTES:

Special thanks to Herman Zittel, cartographer, who prepared the attached map of routes taken by Work, Hastings, & Denver.

Our tour will not include information on Harrison Pass, another 'shortcut' some distance south of Secret Pass. This was used by early pack train parties, including Bidwell/Bartleson in 1841 after they abandoned their wagons near the Nevada/Utah border. Unfortunately, Harrison Pass would still lead emigrants through the difficult canyon route down the South Fork of the Humboldt to re-connect with the California Trail.

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<sup>4</sup> Denver's diary, provided by Don Buck, was published in Arizona and the West, Spring 1975, The Denver Diary, Pages 35-62, edited by Richard E. Meyer, University of Kansas, where original diary may be found.

The Humboldt River is north ... so let's go south

## TOUR ROUTE & PARTICIPANT INSTRUCTIONS

Tour will start promptly at 9 a.m. Pacific Standard Time at the location of Trails West Rail Marker C-34. From the east Elko I80 exit, drive east 17.5 miles and get off at Halleck, Exit 321. Drive south .8 mile past first railroad tracks where there is a "Halleck" sign and turn right (west) into a large parking lot and the Trails West Marker just west of the Post Office.

Leave Elko with a full tank of gas and an empty bladder. Short of sagebrush cover, first bathrooms on our tour will be in Wells, perhaps 2 ½ hours from start. The "rules of the road" are:

- 1) Everyone must sign a Liability Waiver/Release Form before going on trip.
- 2) Leave headlights on and at turns make sure vehicle behind you sees which way you are turning before continuing.
- 3) Most of this trip will be on paved roads, but portions on dirt/gravel may be dusty, so keep a safe distance between cars.
- 4) Not necessary, but if you have a CB radio, put it on Channel 13.
- 5) If you decide to leave the group, advise the trip leader.

This tour begins on the Fort Hall to California Emigrant Trail. Look south to see Secret Pass in the distance. Against good advice, this is where, in 1846, Lansford Hastings decided to head eastward with his pack train over Secret Pass to commence creation of his legacy cutoff, but this pass is not included in his wagon route. Note on the attached map how Secret Pass provides a rather direct connection to the Humboldt River, which James Denver subsequently took advantage of in 1850. A number of exploration pack train parties had used this pass prior to Hastings with a notable exception of John Work in 1831. We will see how he connected to the Humboldt later in this tour which would have been most favorable for

wagons, apparently unknown to Hastings. His route with wagons headed far south on the east side of the Ruby Mountains, over a simple pass, and then far north, with difficulty, to rejoin the California trail just west of Elko. The commonality between Work, Hastings, and Denver is that all three in their initial travels came to Snow Water Lake, seen later in this tour. From that location, each went in different directions to get to the Humboldt River. The simplicity of either the Work or Denver route for wagons will be evident.

Tour directions:

Drive 9.7 miles south on Hwy. 229 and park off highway at junction with the unmarked Clubine Road on right [this road heads west past old site of Fort Halleck to Lamoille]. At this junction, on the east side of Hwy. 229, Trails West Marker PT-12 is located. We will stop a few miles beyond here to visualize the suitability of Secret Pass for wagons - with the knowledge that only four years after Hastings created his 'cutoff' James Denver takes wagons over Secret Pass.

Note that this marker leads with the words "Pack Trail" for which Secret Pass has been historically most noted. Starting here, with information courtesy of Don Buck, we will speculate about de-bunking the "pack trail only" thinking.

Our next stop will be at a mid-way point heading up Secret Pass to see the deep Secret Creek canyon to the west which flows to the Humboldt River. Looking eastward is the terrain that Denver took wagons in 1850 with a downhill advantage to the Humboldt River.

Drive 6.5 miles south on Hwy. 229 and - with caution - park on the left side of the road. We are now in Secret Valley near Trails West Marker PT-11. Looking north will be the route of the first wagons down from Secret Pass in 1850. The summit of Secret Pass is just south of us and in 3.5 miles, turn left onto the dirt/gravel road to the east and continue 3 miles, pull off on the right side of the road.

We are now in the north end of Ruby Valley. A stop here offers an excellent view of where Lansford Hastings was headed with wagons to re-join the California Trail. Look as far south as possible which is the way he took wagons. Compare this with where you have just driven - Denver's route just 4 years later.

We will next drive by Trails West Marker PT-10 due west of Snow Water Lake which is beyond the range seen on our east. This Marker recites:

#### PACK TRAIL 1845 & 1846 – EAST TO RUBY VALLEY

“continued with some difficulty to follow Freemonts trail up the brook to a handsome little valy [Secret Valley] and over a ridge [Secret Pass] to a nother valley Ruby Valley” – James Clyman May 23, 1846 [with Lansford Hastings]

From about this marker, prior pack trail parties would cross the range to your east from Snow Water Lake heading either east or west, rather than diverting around to the south.

Continue driving south to end of road at Highway 229. At about this junction, we intersect the Hastings Cutoff wagon trail coming from the east, then heading southwest down Ruby Valley towards hot springs which might be located by rising steam. About here is where Denver swung north with his wagons to head over Secret Pass - deviating from Hasting’s route.

Turn left (east) on Hwy. 229 and drive to the junction with Highway 93, then [BE CAREFUL] turn left (north) and continue up to Trails West Marker HN-13 on the east side of the road. Just south of here is another Trails West Marker, HN-14, that reflects the direction of the cutoff to the southwest around the range to the west. Near here is where pack trail parties would simply travel directly over this range towards TW Marker PT-10 that we drove past. Look far east for a view of where both westward packers and wagons were coming from. This is truly a fateful location - if the wagons headed north, they would have re-joined the California Trail in a day or two by using the 1831 John Work route to the headwaters of the Humboldt River. We will approximate Work’s route driving north to Wells. Why this way was not known to Hastings is “THE” big question many historians have contemplated.

Leaving Marker HN-13, we will drive past Snow Water Lake on the east side of the highway. This feature is the general area where Work (1831), Hastings (i1846), and Denver (i1850) all came to, but then took divergent routes to get to the Humboldt River.

Less than 2 miles north of Snow Water Lake we will be turning left - Very important: provide lots of room between cars because this turn left (west)

onto Highway 232 to Clover Valley has NO TURN LANE. Be extremely careful as both semi-trucks and vehicles on Highway 93 travel at high speed! If you have to, pull off the road to the right to avoid traffic before attempting your turn. This is a scenic diversion off Highway 93 and likely where Work traveled north – your imagination is required. This road ends where it re-joins Highway 93, turn left for 18.3 miles drive to Wells – again, use caution getting back onto 93.

When you see the Flying J Truck Stop on the right, turn right (east) just south of it and park in their back lot next to a large propane tank. Bathrooms are nearby at this I80 junction. We can eat lunch here. For those who now want to return directly to Elko, just head west on I80 – you are now on the Fort Hall to California trail following the Humboldt River.

Others that would prefer an off freeway scenic return to Elko, we will drive west on I80, get off at Welcome Exit 343 and take back roads through Starr Valley, and continue on to visit the Fort Halleck site before ending our tour in Lamoille. This route has good gravel and dirt roads. In Lamoille vaulted toilets are on the west side of the “Grove”. Our tour will end here – Elko is about 20 miles north on the same road.